



## More Zoroastrian Scenes on the Wirkak (Shi Jun) Sarcophagus

FRANTZ GRENET

COLLÈGE DE FRANCE, PARIS

The reliefs of the sarcophagus of Wirkak (494–579), a Sogdian *sabao*, appointed leader of Sogdian merchant communities who occupied various posts in Northern China and died in Chang'an, were brought to international attention in 2004. Since then they have been interpreted according to various religious systems (panels 1 and 8–11, while panels 2–7 show “biographical” sequence with no religious overtones except perhaps for the banquet scene on panel 7).<sup>1</sup>

In 2004 Pénélope Riboud, Yang Junkai and I proposed an unmitigated Zoroastrian interpretation for the lower register of panels 9–10–11 (the crossing of the Chinwad Bridge) and the upper register of panels 9 and 11 (the advent of the souls in Paradise), while leaving for further examination the other religious scenes (panels 1 and 8, upper register of panel 10).<sup>2</sup>

In 2005 Étienne de la Vaissière, while agreeing with the Zoroastrian contents of most scenes previously commented on, proposed a Manichaean interpretation of panels 1, 8 and the upper registers of panels 9 and 10.<sup>3</sup> I agreed with him from the onset, except concerning the top of panel 9, which I still considered an illustration of Zoroastrian descriptions of the reception of the soul in Paradise.<sup>4</sup> Yutaka Yoshida approved la Vaissière's interpretation and made some new proposals, based on comparisons with scenes of the judgment of the soul in the newly identified Chinese Manichaean paintings from Ningbo (Song period).<sup>5</sup> In 2011 Guitty Azarpay advanced further arguments in favour of la Vaissière's interpretation,<sup>6</sup> which he refined in 2015.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016 Zsuzsanna Gulácsi and Jason BeDuhn introduced a new turn in the debate, by rejecting any idea of eclecticism and proposing a Zoroastrian meaning for some scenes previously not in-

terpreted as such, while considering that scenes still not completely elucidated might eventually be explained along this line (“now that the cloud of uncertainty regarding the completely Zoroastrian character of the carvings on the sarcophagus has been cleared away, researchers from a number of disciplines, especially religious studies and art history, can work toward further insights into the meaning and significance of the iconography”).<sup>8</sup>

Initially I was sceptical, and conveyed my doubts to Gulácsi and BeDuhn, who patiently bore with my objections. Now (May 2017), for the first time since 2004 having had the opportunity to re-examine directly the sarcophagus in the Xi'an Museum in the company of its discoverer Yang Junkai,<sup>9</sup> I have come to realize that la Vaissière and I had wrongly interpreted some details which we had considered crucial in our Manichaean “reading.” I accept most though not all, of Gulácsi and BeDuhn's suggestions, and furthermore I can adduce some hitherto overlooked Zoroastrian Pahlavi passages for the two scenes which they have left unexplained.

I examine the panels according to the sequence, i.e. from right to left, starting from the right end of the western side.

### Panel 1 (fig. 1)

At the top a preacher in Buddhist dress addresses two groups of three, which appear as representative of various ethnic/social groups, and also Wirkak and his wife Wiyusi. A third “ethnic” group of three is depicted slightly below, on the right-hand side.

Further below, Wirkak and Wiyusi reappear in a praying attitude, this time with their three sons

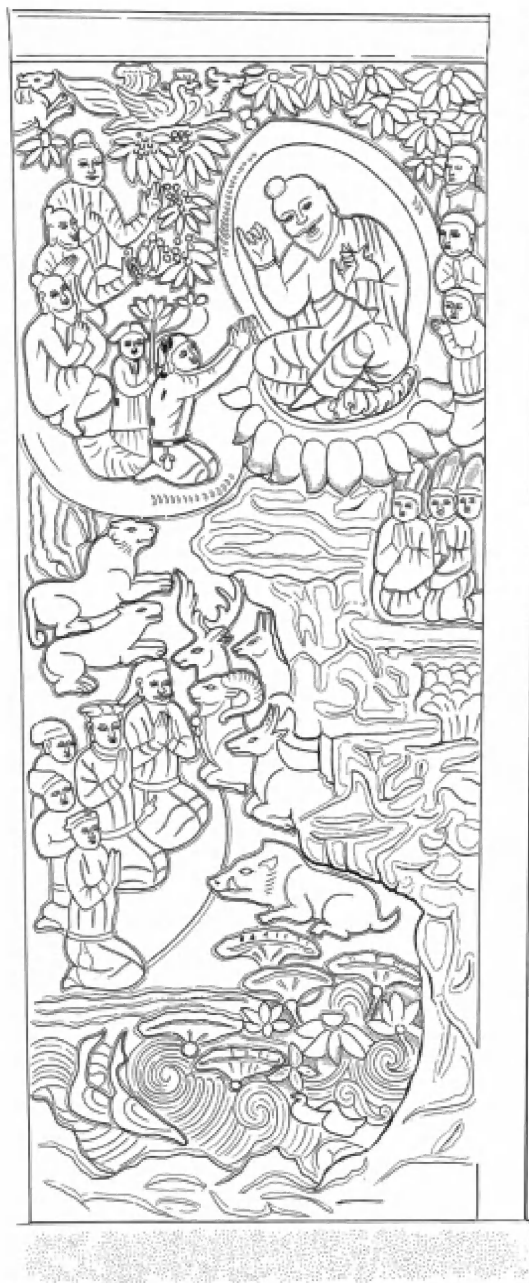


Fig. 1. Panel 1.

named in the epitaph, and together with a lion and a lioness. They face a group of animals (deer, mouflon, ibex, boar) all of which belong to the Zoroastrian "good" creation and are hunted for their flesh. This scene is generally, and rightly, interpreted as an act of repentance of the hunters (humans and lions) towards the hunted.

La Vaissière and I identified the preaching figure as Mani, often called in Chinese Manichaean texts "the Buddha of Light." In this we were influenced by our perception of the three seated figures, below right, whose tri-lobed pointed hats we interpreted as the typical headgear of Manichaean *electi* documented by Turfan miniatures of the 9th–10th centuries. Gulácsi and BeDuhn since have argued, in my opinion convincingly, that the comparison is superficial and the hats are of a completely different type than the four-sided, flat-topped Manichaean hats. They propose closer, though not completely identical, analogies with the exuberant, tall, multi-lobed headgears (themselves quite variegated) worn by Chinese courtiers on contemporary depictions. For the preacher they insist on the Buddhist model being Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, but here significantly provided with strange features never encountered with images of Buddhas: an "aristocratic Iranian" pointed beard and upright moustache; a gesture of the right hand which does not correspond to any Buddhist *mudra* (all fingers are bent except the little one).<sup>10</sup> These changes, which La Vaissière and I had already noticed, are meant to indicate that, although the character looks like Maitreya, he is not Maitreya, but belongs rather to the Iranian sphere.

If the character is not Mani, who is he? Gulácsi and BeDuhn, assuming that the general context of these reliefs suggests that a Zoroastrian interpretation should be looked for in the first place, propose the Sōshans, the last of the three eschatological Saviours. Indeed he has no closer Buddhist approximation than Maitreya who, like him, will make Paradise descend on the Earth. This is surely an uncomfortable option for an Iranologist, who would expect the Sōshans to look even more Iranian, perhaps more specifically as a Zoroastrian priest (the three Sōshans are Zoroaster's posthumous sons). Nevertheless, I now consider that there is no alternative. Two explanations can be tentatively proposed for this choice of Maitreya as the iconographic model. Firstly, probably the

people responsible for the programme were unable to provide the stone carver, initially trained in the Buddhist repertoire, with a set Sogdian model for the Sôshans, contrary to some other themes illustrated in the Sino-Sogdian reliefs. Secondly, one cannot exclude that some mixture of Zoroastrian and Mahāyānic eschatological messages could take place. It is perhaps significant that the part of the Sôshans' preaching which has been selected is the abandonment of flesh eating and thus of hunting (the main source of meat in the aristocratic way of life with which Wirkak and his family identified themselves).<sup>11</sup> This theme is, indeed, present in Zoroastrian prophecies concerning the last millennium, and Gulácsi and BeDuhn have quoted explicit passages, but this is not the only theme one can find in this context. Interestingly enough, it is attested at Kakrak (Bāmiyān) in association with Maitreya: Akira Miyaji has proposed interpreting the enigmatic figure of the "Hunter King" offering his bow, his arrows and his dog as "a king of Bāmiyān who applied [*sic*] the divinity and followed the image of *cakravartin* (appearing) in this world when Bodhisattva Maitreya is reborn here, below, from the Tūṣita Heaven."<sup>12</sup> A comparable image is on a terracotta plaque found on the site of Kafyrkala (Northern Tukharistān) and attributed to the first half of the 8th century. It depicts an aristocratic worshipper followed by a servant who carries his quiver and gorytus in addition to a torque, obviously offerings to the Buddha. Though in this case no iconography of Maitreya has been found in association (but the wall paintings of the Buddhist chapel in the palace have perished), the excavator Viktor Solov'ev has proposed a comparison with the Bāmiyān "Hunter King."<sup>13</sup>

As for the various groups addressed by the Sôshans, the people top left, initially interpreted as Taoists, are more likely Indians, as proposed by Gulácsi and BeDuhn. The people top right are Sogdians, or perhaps more generally Hu (Western Barbarians according to the Chinese view). The three characters below right who seem more distant from the main scene are Chinese courtiers. The same groups (Indians, Sogdians and their neighbours, Chinese officials) appear to symbolize universality in the famous "Ambassadors' Painting" executed at Samarkand in ca. 660.<sup>14</sup>

The position of this scene, at the beginning of the whole sequence, is quite surprising, for it

seems to disrupt the chronological order: Wirkak appears as a mature adult (he and his wife are accompanied by their sons), thus older than in the first biographical scenes (on which see below for additional comments), but not yet dead, thus prior to the final scenes at the end. The intention is to provide a religious keynote to the entire life and death of Wirkak and Wiyusi, as according to the Zoroastrian doctrine the sole purpose of the individual destiny is to assist in the advent of the eschaton. The specific insistence on the vegetarian message could explain an odd feature in Wirkak's illustrated biography: he is never shown hunting, though he accompanies hunting rulers and at least two other Sino-Sogdian tombs, those of An Jia and Yu Hong, have the tomb owner taking a direct part in the hunt.

#### Panel 8 (fig. 2)

This panel is set at the left end of the northern side and immediately follows the biographical sequence. The upper part bears a particularly problematic scene with an ascetic in a cave, to which I shall return. The middle and lower parts show a couple, obviously Wirkak and Wiyusi, partly submerged in tormented waters and making a supplication gesture. Three winged female beings fly from above and come to their rescue. One is holding what seems to be a footed plate and a vase with a flower.

La Vaissière and I identified this scene as the rescue from the frightful ocean of rebirth (*samsara*), a Manichaean (originally Buddhist) theme. Gulácsi and BeDuhn made a decisive point in showing that the waters peopled with monstrous *makara* figures follow the same iconographic conventions as the waters under the Chinwad Bridge in the following sequence, and therefore should be interpreted identically as the Zoroastrian Hell. Then, in order to explain the scene as a whole, they proceed to two complicated and unconvincing hypotheses: this could be Wirkak and Wiyusi rescued from Hell at the time of the Final Judgment—but between their death and the eschaton they did not go to Hell but to Paradise, hence the desperate assumption that the artist copied "part of an exemplar that had scenes of resurrection from various locations;" or this could be the final ordeal in the flood of



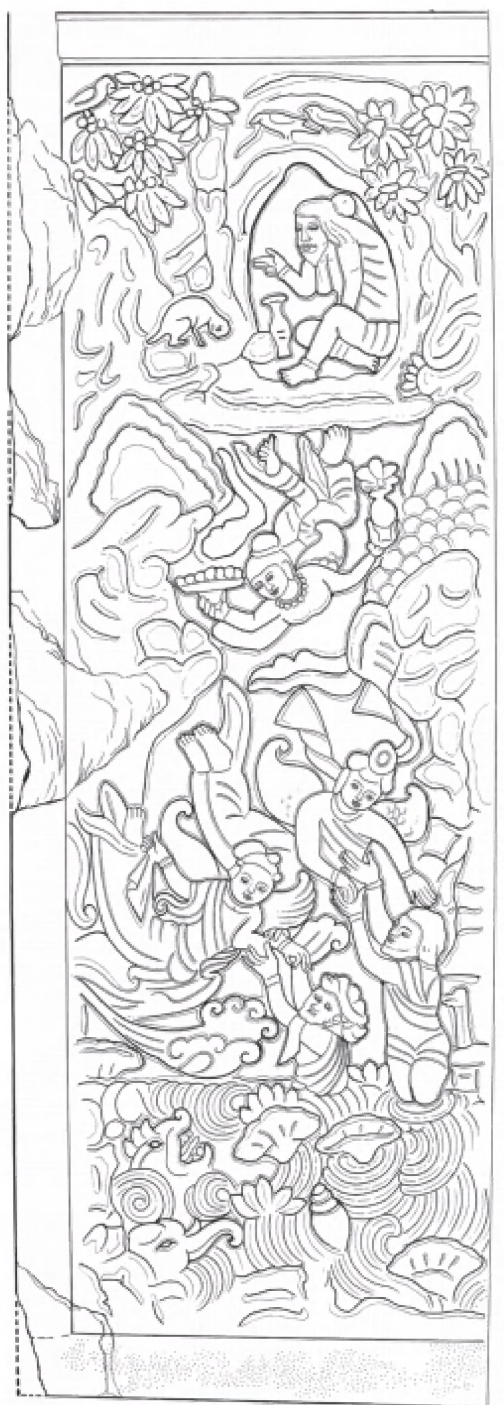


Fig. 2. Panel 8.

molten metal—but this purifying flood is a different concept than Hell.

Actually a far better interpretation is at hand. One has simply to consider the position of this panel in the sequence: it comes after Wirkak's and Wiyusi's terrestrial life, and before their crossing of the Chinwad Bridge on the fourth dawn after death.<sup>15</sup> What happens to the soul the three preceding days and nights? The best description is in *Dādestān ī dēnīg* 24.2–4:

During these three nights the soul is on earth (. . .) and is in doubt about its own (destined) place and feels grievous fear of the accounting and great terror of the Bridge and grievous fear of Hell, and its thoughts display (to him) grievous grief and fear. (. . .) On account of the good deeds which it has done in the material world, the first night the Spirit (*mēnōg*) of Good Thoughts, the second night the Spirit of Good Words, and the third night the Spirit of Good Deeds come to the soul and provide him comfort and help (*u-š rāmišnīg ud frayādag bawēnd*).<sup>16</sup>

The three celestial female creatures are the three comforting "Spirits." Though Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds are not listed among Zoroastrian deities, they are nevertheless characterized as *mēnōg* and credited with their own capacity to act, which justifies their anthropomorphic depiction. One can note also that none of them wears a tripartite crown like the ladies I interpreted as the *Dēn* and her attendants in the following sequence, which singles them out as different beings. The belief in their intervention during these three decisive nights might underline the Middle Persian personal name *Sebōxt* "saved by the Three," which in a Christian context was probably reinterpreted as referring to the Holy Trinity.<sup>17</sup>

The ascetic figure in a cave, occupying the top of the panel and conversing with a prostrate animal, has no obvious connection with what is taking place below. La Vaissière identified him as another image of Mani, who, according to some Muslim sources not predating the 12th century, once retired to a cave. Gulácsi and BeDuhn have shown that the image comes straight from the Buddhist repertoire, either popular stories known from Kizil paintings showing emaciated sages instructing animals, or more precisely the *Komāyaputta Jātaka* of which no image is known and which tells of a mendicant in a cave instructing a monkey to the practice of virtue. On direct

examination, it appears that the animal is not obviously a monkey and could be a small feline as well. They do not propose any specific reinterpretation in a Zoroastrian context.

I follow la Vaissière in considering that this figure cannot be typologically disassociated from the other Indian-looking teacher, the Sōshans, according to Gulácsi, BeDuhn and myself, who occupies a similar position on the top of panel 1, but he is hardly the same person (in particular, his moustache is different, not upright but straight with downturned ends). A plausible guess, which I present as no more than a guess, is Zoroaster himself. Among the Zoroastrian saviours of mankind he is the only one who experienced anchorite life. To be sure, direct references to a retreat in a desert or on a mountain are found only in Greco-Roman literature, mainly the 1st century C.E. authors Pliny the Elder and Dio Chrysostomus; according to Pliny he lived twenty years in the desert, sustaining himself with cheese. Albert de Jong considers that there is a "genuine ring" in this story.<sup>18</sup> In the 9th–10th century Pahlavi accounts we have the episode toned down but nonetheless we read in the *Anthology of Zādspram* (16–19) that at the age of twenty Zoroaster quarrelled with his parents, refused the bride chosen for him, left their home, and during ten years wandered about feeding poor people and animals.<sup>19</sup>

In the preceding years he is said to have argued with "sorcerers," and whatever the listening animal on our relief is (a monkey, a feline ?) it is classed as demoniac. Would the hypothesis hold good, the mechanical borrowing of an Indian model would be in line with the Maitreya-like Sōshans, and for the same reason, the lack of a set Iranian iconographical model: no icon of Zoroaster is documented anywhere in the Zoroastrian sphere before the 19th century (though they exist in Manichaean painting that dates from the 9th–10th centuries). Among all the stories told about Zoroaster, his temporary withdrawal from social life was probably the most appealing in an originally Buddhist milieu. In addition, a direct link with the three "Spirits" in the scene below can be inferred from the *Frawardīn Yasht* (Yt. 13.88), where at the very beginning of Zoroaster's eulogy he is hailed for having been "the first one who thought the Good, the first one who spoke the Good, the first one who did the Good."

### Panel 9, Top (fig. 3)

For the main portions of the last three panels (9–10–11), which in fact constitute a single composition, I refer to the generally accepted commentary of Grenet, Riboud and Yang 2004. For one detail, the four parted horses distributed across panels 10 and 11 and symbolizing Mithra's quadriga (i.e. the "station of the sun" where the souls are led after their judgment), Gulácsi and BeDuhn express a doubt, but images of winged horses are frequently seen on Sasanian seals and they probably function as *pars pro toto* for Mithra in his quadriga. In one case, closer to that under examination, there are two winged horse protomes on a seal belonging to an official named Dād-Burz-Mihr, with a blessing inscription "protection in (the Fire) Burzēn-Mihr"; both these composed names include that of Mithra.<sup>20</sup>

For the interpretation of the welcome of Wirkak's and Wiyusi's souls at the top of panel 9, there is now general agreement with my identification of the enthroned god with Wēshparkar, i.e. Vayu, the Avestan god of celestial space (Pahlavi Way, Bactr.-Sogd. Wēsh), whose type in Bactria and Sogdiana was modelled on a three-headed Shiva Maheshvara. The three women with identical crowns are, according to me, the Dēn making a welcoming gesture and two attendants whose function is to carry her attributes: a flower and a cup (the Dēn, who comes first, is singled out by her wings and by her hand passed in her *kustīg*, the faithful's belt, the material symbol of the religious obligations which is the core concept of the Dēn). La Vaissière admits the iconographic identity with Wēshparkar, but considers that the image was given a fresh Manichaean interpretation as the Righteous Judge (he had initially proposed the Wise Guide). The three crowned women who welcome the kneeling souls of Wirkak and Wiyusi would be the Light Maiden and her attendants, mentioned in Manichaean texts and depicted in Manichaean paintings showing the judgment of the soul. Gulácsi and BeDuhn accept the idea of Wēshparkar and, for the three welcoming women, question the accuracy of la Vaissière's textual and iconographic comparisons, arguing that the attributes held in their hands do not match precisely (in particular the Chinese paintings show a banner, which is absent in the present case). At the same time they are reluctant to identify the leader of the group as the Dēn





Fig. 3. Panels 9–11.

because they consider that, should it be the case, not one or three such figures would be expected, but two: one for Wirkak and one for Wiyusi. Consequently they explore other identifications in the Zoroastrian pantheon, eventually ending without a conclusion.

These objections from various sides are refutable. First, there is no reason to expect a specific Dēn for Wiyusi. Zoroastrian texts (Avestan and Pahlavi) elaborate a lot on the encounter of the man's soul with his female Dēn, with obvious sexual connotations, but understandably enough, one never reads anything about a woman's soul meeting the expected counterpart—a handsome young man personifying her own good deeds.

There seems to be an understanding that the wife shares her husband's Dēn, for she is expected to have shared his merits. This holds even more true for Wiyusi, who after a sixty-year marital life died almost at the same time as her husband. As for la Vaissière's argument, the food tray given to Wirkak and the cup held by the third maiden do not belong specifically to the Manichaean Light Maiden and her attendants: though not mentioned in Zoroastrian texts, a cup or a dish are present in the two Sogdian images of the Good Dēn we have, independently from any Manichaean context, on an ossuary from Chāch, i.e. Tashkent (a cup), and on a paper image from Dunhuang (a dish).<sup>21</sup> In both cases she has flowers on her head, which in

the sarcophagus version have been transferred to the hand of the second maiden. The wings, not mentioned in the texts, are a variation of the billowing scarf shown on the Chāch ossuary and on the Dunhuang image, expressing the coming of the Dēn in the Southern Wind.

It is appropriate here to return to the *Bundahishn*, which provides a fair account of what is illustrated on the eastern side of the Wirkak sarcophagus: the perilous crossing of the Bridge with the “shape of fire” showing the way, the rock spur at the end, the reception of the souls presided over by Vayu/Wēshparkar, while some details are mentioned in other passages or other texts (the two dogs at the entrance of the Bridge, the welcoming Dēn, the battle between the Good and Bad Dēns on which I shall comment next):

*G.Bd.* 30.22–23: Then they convey that soul to the foot of mount Hariburz, above which there goes the edge of a beam (of scales) up to the top of the peak, where that sharp edge is. [. . .] If the soul is that of a righteous, that sharp edge remains as wide as it is. The Farnbag Fire, the victorious, smites the darkness and, in the form of fire, conveys that soul cross over that edge, and the gods in the world of thought purify it. It conveys it over the other branch of the beam to the top of the Hariburz, and Good Way takes it by the hand and brings it to his own place, that it, he who receives the soul, delivers it there. [. . .] 26: The first step takes him to the star level, the second to the moon level, the third to the sun level, where paradise is.<sup>22</sup>

### Panel 10, Top (fig. 3)

The top of panel 10, set between the welcome of Wirkak and Wiyusi by the gods and their triumphal advent at the sun station, shows two women involved in some sort of struggle. The one at the top looks exactly like the one I identify as the Dēn in the preceding scene, and as nobody else in the whole set of reliefs: same crown, same wings, same tied belt (the only differences, very minor, are the absence of pendants on the necklace and the addition of a small element on top of the central crown ornament). She holds a tall object at shoulder height. The seemingly female figure below has no wings and, as shown by la Vaissière, looks like *apsara* figures floating in the air depicted on some Dunhuang paintings. In the present case she holds an indistinct object and is falling downwards. La Vaissière’s interpreta-

tion started from the recognition of the “tall object” as a miniature limbless human figure, with schematized facial features and perhaps keeping some long object at her waist. I initially shared this impression, not expressed in the published drawings (which are actually accurate) but based on the photographs. We considered that this human figure could be a symbol of Wirkak’s soul, or perhaps rather of the “last statue” (*andrias*) which gathers the last particles of Light at the time of the Manichaean eschaton. Consequently we interpreted the scene as an unspecified divine being defeating Az, the female demon of Concupiscence, of which a Buddhist *apsara* could be a good approximation.

Now, having re-examined the reliefs directly, I cannot maintain this interpretation. The object is definitely not a human figure and what we took as facial features are just superficial scratches which do not at all express an intention of the carver. It is most likely a “small, lidded jar,” as proposed by Gulácsi and BeDuhn—more precisely, a jar with a convex lid.<sup>23</sup> As they did for the welcome scene, they try to identify the two fighting characters with various deities involved in personal salvation, but they do not come to a conclusion.

Realizing now the similarity of the victorious figure with the Dēn in the preceding panel, I identify her as this deity in one of the functions she assumes in the post-mortem scenario, that of “treasure-bearer of good works.” The defeated figure is the Bad Dēn, “treasure-bearer of bad works,” sometimes qualified as a “whore” (*zan ī jeh*), therefore as liable as Az to be depicted as an *apsara*. Among several Pahlavi passages describing this situation, two are particularly explicit:

*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 23.5: “On the same third night at dawn, the guardian and treasurer of good deeds who is like a handsome maiden comes to meet it, with the store (*hambār*) of its own good deeds on her shoulder.”<sup>24</sup>

*Škand Gumānīg Wizār* 4.92–93: “Its treasure-bearers (*ganjbarān*) unto whom its good works and sins are entrusted advance there for a struggle (*kōxšīdārīh*), and if the treasure-bearer of good works is a greater strength, by her victory she releases it from the hand of the adversary, and leads it to the Great Seat and the co-relationship with the Lights.”<sup>25</sup>

The jar held “on her shoulder” (at least, at shoulder height) by the Good Dēn surely contains some material form of the good works. What first comes to mind is a scroll inscribed with their list.





Fig. 4. Seal from the Aman ur Rahman collection, 05.01.11 (imprint).

The shapeless object hold by the Bad Dēn is more difficult to explain: perhaps the discarded scroll of bad works, taken out of its container and torn? A recently identified image of the Dēn on an Eastern Iranian Sasanian seal (fig. 4) shows her accompanied by her two dogs (also depicted on panel 9 above the entrance of the Chinwad Bridge), meeting two souls and holding a lidded jar.<sup>26</sup>

### A Few More Remarks on the "Biographical" Panels 2–7 (fig. 5)

Contrary to all Sino-Sogdian funerary reliefs, the "biographical" reliefs on the Wirkak sarcophagus (panels 2–7) appear to be ordered in a chronological sequence and, taken individually, to give a less conventional glimpse at episodes of his life than other reliefs do. In 2007 Penelope Riboud and I proposed a complete interpretation, which we maintain today.<sup>27</sup>

In the same issue of the *BAI* Albert Dien, while accepting the idea of a chronological sequence, interpreted several panels differently than we did.<sup>28</sup> The crowned characters on panels 2, 3, 4 and 5 would not be foreign rulers, but in the first case Wirkak's parents holding him as a baby, then different versions of Wirkak himself shown at various stages of his social ascent.

This interpretation raises several difficulties. According to Dien, Wirkak would appear twice on panel 3, leading a caravan at the bottom and hunting on top, then again twice on panel 4, giving instructions to his son in the caravan at the bottom and enthroned on top. It is true that the images of Wirkak and his wife are duplicated on the religious panel 1, but in this case they are easily recognizable by their costume and headdress, while in the panels under discussion, the character at the bottom and the character at the top are dressed completely differently from each other. Dien takes the crown as a symbol of the *sabao* status reached by Wirkak, but this presumed status symbol would lack consistency: the crowns are different in all instances, only those of panels 3 and 4 bear a vague similarity.<sup>29</sup> In fact, as demonstrated by Rong Xinjiang and Etsuko Kageyama, the *sabao* hat, abundantly documented in reliefs and wall paintings, was a rather flat white cap, sometimes bilobed: it is the headdress Wirkak assumes on panels 6 and 7, in the final stage of his career.<sup>30</sup> Exchanging a quasi-royal crown for a cloth hat is not an expected mark of social promotion.

In the interpretation Penelope Riboud and I proposed in 2007, the scenes with crowned rulers are interaction scenes, showing Wirkak dealing with foreign political powers during his active commercial career (at the beginning, panel 2, as an adolescent accompanying his father or grandfather). I would now propose that he then acted in the capacity of *urtaq*, manager of the business interests of nomadic rulers, like Maniakh, the Sogdian who was a privileged envoy of the Turkish *qaghan* to the Sasanians and Byzantium (and at his death left his charge to his son).<sup>31</sup> Such interaction scenes are dominant in the contemporary An Jia reliefs, where very clearly the deceased is never shown with a royal crown but only with a *sabao* hat. The only difference is that An Jia's partners are long-haired Turks (winged crowns are worn only by envoys sitting next to the yurt where a Turk entertains An Jia), while Wirkak deals with three or four different rulers belonging to the earlier, Hephtalite-Gaoju-Rouran period, when Sasanian-inspired crowns were in fashion. The difference can be explained by the fact that Wirkak, born in 494, had his active commercial career before the Turks replaced the Hephtalites and Rouran in 556, while An Jia, born in 517, dealt mainly with the Turks. At that time Wirkak had already become a sedentary dignitary: panel



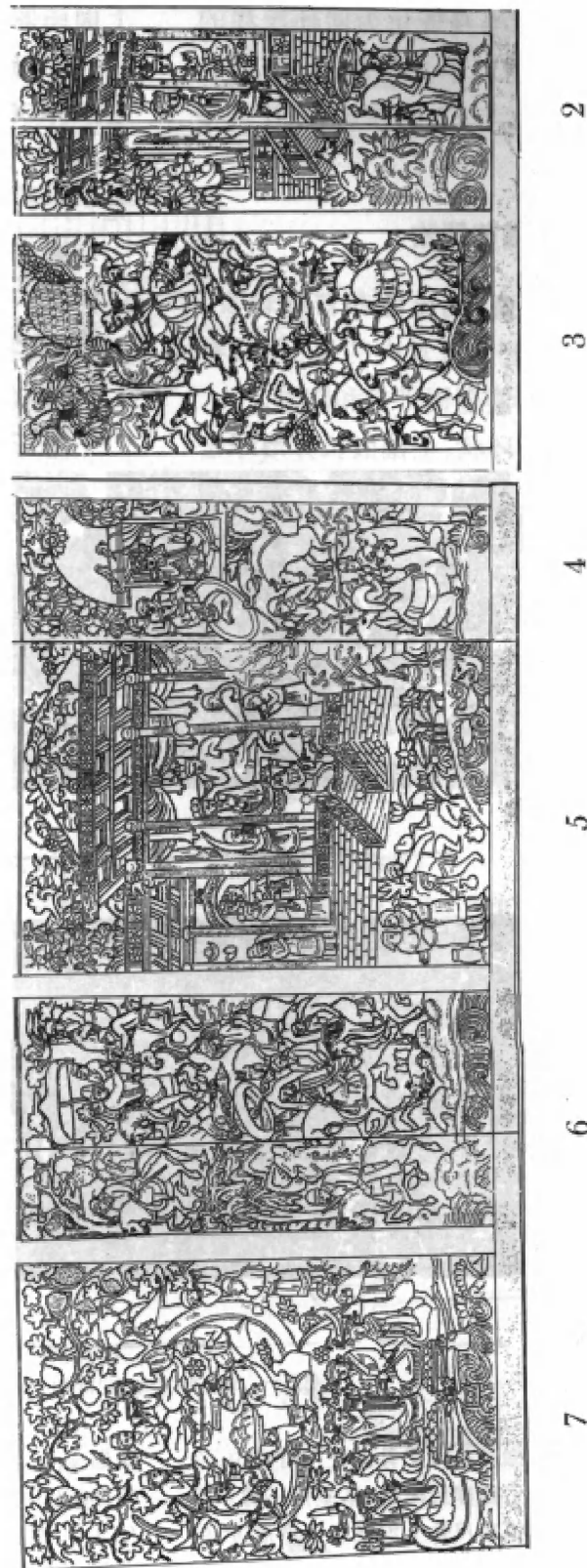


Fig. 5. Panels 2-7.

6 shows him riding under a canopy and accompanied by his wife, probably on his way to a new post (Chief of Supervising Affairs of the *sabao* bureau at Guzang in 535, or *sabao* of Liangzhou in 565). On panel 7 he and his wife entertain fellow-countrymen at Nowruz (then in July, hence the grapes), a social and religious duty of Iranian kings which probably a *sabao* had to assume in his local community (on the Anyang panels the only subject depicted is the entertaining *sabao*). On the following panel, panel 8, they are already dead and in the first stage to salvation.

### Conclusion: From Order to Execution

The Chinese sculptors could produce Zoroastrian icons only when supplied with models visible in the religious manifestations of Sogdians in China, or transmitted from Sogdiana. Such was the case for the figures of Zoroastrian priests at work, for the “Rooster-Priests” symbolizing *Srōsh*, for Paradise filled with musicians, for the Good *Dēn*, for *Wēshparkar* in the guise of Shiva Maheshvara, for Nana (on the Miho reliefs); the Chinwad Bridge over tormented waters is already attested on a Samarkand ossuary,<sup>32</sup> though on the Wirkak relief it was substantially adapted with the addition of Indian *makaras*. For other figures or themes, the sculptors were provided only with some oral indications. Such was, I think, the case for the *Sōshans* and, I guess, Zoroaster, which, contrary to *Wēshparkar*, the *Dēn* or Nana, were never used as cult images and, contrary to the “Rooster Priests,” Paradise or the Chinwad Bridge, were unknown on Sogdian ossuaries. In such cases the sculptors were not capable of inventing fresh images imitating the conventions of Sogdian art; they could meet the religious demands only by resorting to their own Buddhist repertoire as a backup.

The religious iconographic programme required by Wirkak or his entourage (his sons, their family priests?) went far beyond anything illustrated in Sino-Sogdian art, where scenes related to post-mortem destiny are very rare: Paradise scenes, very stereotyped, except on the Yu Hong sarcophagus where the deceased is shown seated with his wife, accompanied by a winged figures who can be the *Dēn* or a *Fravashi*, on the same sarcophagus, perhaps Mithra on horseback meeting his sacrificial horse,<sup>33</sup> on the Miho couch, a discrete allusion to the exposure of the corpse, and the *sedra* ritual performed when dispatching the soul to the

Chinwad Bridge.<sup>34</sup> Rather than the expression of a popular, lay Sogdian variant of Zoroastrianism, the religious scenes in the Wirkak reliefs appear as an extremely well-informed version, close to the Pahlavi texts which all postdate them by a least three centuries. The only hint at a real syncretism (beyond the “mechanical” syncretism due to the borrowing of Buddhist formulas) is the insistence on the rejection of hunting, which could betray some influence from the cult of Maitreya.

### Notes

1. Yang 2014. For Sino-Sogdian tombs in general the fullest corpus is now Wertmann 2015, whose commentaries are, however, more focused on archaeology and art history than on religious interpretations.

2. Grenet, Riboud and Yang 2004.

3. la Vaissière 2005.

4. Grenet 2007: 474–76.

5. Yoshida 2009.

6. Azarpay 2011: 60–63.

7. la Vaissière 2015.

8. Gulácsi and BeDuhn 2016. I follow their numbering of the panels. As I assume that the reader of the present paper will have this article at hand, I shall not provide page references for it.

9. I wish also to thank Dr Bi Bo (Renmin University, Beijing) who accompanied me and made excellent observations.

10. At first we thought that the forefinger was also lifted, and we proposed to recognize a gesture of victory already identified in proper Iranian contexts, to which Gulácsi and BeDuhn agreed. Fresh examination of the relief showed beyond doubt that the forefinger is folded under the tip of the thumb, thus making this gesture unique.

11. The regular way of obtaining meat is the animal sacrifice, but the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* (58.78–79) indicates that it is permitted to kill a “mountain ox” (*mouflon*?) on the hunt (and, implicitly, to eat its non-sacrificed flesh); if the animal is captured on the hunt it has to be properly sacrificed, just like a tame animal (Williams 1990: vol. 1, text pp. 216–17, translation vol. 2, p. 103).

12. Miyaji 2003: p. 145, fig. 20.

13. Solov’ev 1990.

14. *Royal Naurtūz in Samarkand*; Compareti 2016.

15. In Gulácsi and BeDuhn’s article, fig. 2, the position of this panel is inverted with that of panel 1, but in their text the right order is followed.

16. Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 84–85 (slightly modified). The description is phrased differently in *Mēnōg ī xrad* 2.158–160. All texts relevant to individual eschatology are gathered and aptly commented on in Pavry 1929, which is still highly recommendable when starting any research on this topic, though the translations must be updated.



17. Gignoux: no. 833.
  18. de Jong 1997: 321–23.
  19. Gignoux and Tafazzoli 1993: 74–77.
  20. Gyselen 2003: pp. 134–35 and pl. 4d.
  21. Grenet and Zhang 1998 (see p. 178 and fig. 3 for the Chāch ossuary). See below for the Eastern Iranian Sasanian seal in the Aman ur Rahman collection. Concerning the Dunhuang image, Guitty Azarpay (Azarpay 2011: 66–75) accepts the identification of the Good Dēn but considers that the facing figure Zhang Guangda and I identified as the Bad Dēn is Nana, here fitted with some unusual chthonic attributes. Lilla Russell-Smith (Russell-Smith 2005: 99–104) cautiously rejects both identifications and inclines to derive these images from a local Buddhist demonic repertoire. I admit such backgrounds, but I still hold that these images have been reworked according to a dualistic symbolic which makes sense only in Zoroastrianism (the dog versus the wolf, the tied cotton *kustig* versus the leather belt, untied in order to mark the Bad Dēn as a prostitute—none of the Buddhist counter-examples adduced by Russell-Smith show this detail).
  22. Skjærvø 2011: 188 (slightly modified). In this description the meanings are skilfully intermixed: the ridge of Mount Hariburz, the Chinwad Bridge and the scales where the soul will be judged. For an excellent commentary see Timuş 2011: 370–72.
  23. I could not recognize such an object in the ceramic collections I visited in Xi'an and Turfan, but ceramic jars are seldom preserved with their lids. Pr Zhang jianlin (Shaanxi Archaeology Institute) brought to my attention a similar lidded silver jar from the Tang period (Da Changling site, Gansu, unpublished).
  24. Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 82–83.
  25. Pavry 1929: 87–88 (slightly modified). Pavry's translation sticks more to the text than de Menasce 1945: 58–59.
  26. Shenkar 2015: 100–109.
  27. Grenet and Riboud 2007.
  28. Dien 2007.
  29. See Grenet and Riboud 2007, drawings fig. 4.
  30. Rong 2005; Kageyama 2005: 364–65.
  31. di Cosmo 2010: 90 (on the *urtaq* generally); la Vaissière 2014: 107–9 (on Maniakhs as an *urtaq*).
  32. For Sogdian Zoroastrian art the richest corpus is now included in Shenkar 2014 (see fig. 133 for the Samarkand ossuary).
  33. Grenet 2007: 470, figs. 7–8.
  34. Grenet 2009.
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